

Of *Astur striatulus*, Ridgway (*A. henshawi*, Nelson), the Museum has a young male procured from California through Mr. Bridges, and another young bird from Sir William Jardine's Collection labelled "Vancouver Island, N.A. (Brown)." My father was not a believer in *A. striatulus*, and its describer wavered about it (cf. 'Auk,' 1884, p. 252). It is a western form of *A. atricapillus*, from which it differs in "having the markings of the underparts so fine as to present a nearly uniform bluish ashy nebulation."

XXXI.—*Notes on the Nesting of some Shetland Birds.*

By ERNEST W. H. BLAGG, M.B.O.U.

I VENTURE to hope that the following notes, comprising the observations made by my friend Dr. Percy Rendall and myself during a visit paid to the Shetlands in the summer of 1892, may not be devoid of interest to readers of 'The Ibis,' inasmuch as there is already a considerable difference in the Avifauna of the district now as compared with the time when Dr. Saxby wrote his well-known work. We visited the Shetlands in the height of the breeding-season, namely, the latter part of May and the early part of June, with the especial object of seeing, in their nesting-haunts, birds of several species which it is either impossible or difficult to meet with further south; and I may say that on the whole we had every reason to be satisfied with our visit. Its success was in no small degree due to the kindness of my friend Mrs. Cameron, of Garth, who most obligingly furnished us with letters of introduction to landowners and other persons of influence in the district. To Mr. George Bruce, of Sand Lodge, and Captain MacFarlane, of Guendale House, we are also especially grateful, for their extreme kindness and courtesy in acting, as they did, as our hosts and guides in an unknown land.

I shall not waste time in describing the position of the various islands we visited, and, for reasons which will be sufficiently obvious to my readers, I shall not minutely

describe the whereabouts of some of the breeding-haunts referred to. In addition to nesting birds I shall also mention a few species which, according to Dr. Saxby's work, are of rare occurrence in the Shetlands, or are not usually met with there in the breeding-season.

FIELDFARE (*Turdus pilaris*). One bird noticed on the island of Noss on the 26th of May, another seen on Balta Isle on the 2nd of June, unless, indeed, it was the same bird gradually working its way north !

— WHEATEAR (*Saxicola oenanthe*). Local name "Stinkle." Very abundant and breeding everywhere.

COMMON WREN (*Troglodytes parvulus*). Not by any means abundant, but met with in several places. We were struck with the difference in appearance between these Wrens and the Wren of the South, the Shetland Wrens being larger and more barred. Might not these Shetland birds be *T. borealis*?

PIED WAGTAIL (*Motacilla lugubris*). Seen in Unst, May 31st.

ROCK PIPIT (*Anthus obscurus*). Very abundant, but the nest very difficult to find ; however, we managed to discover three nests. The first, found on the 26th of May, was only half built ; this was situated in rather a damp and dark spot in a fissure between two large rocks. Another nest, discovered on the 31st of May, contained four eggs very slightly incubated. The nest was situated under a clod of turf at the side of a drain running down to the sea-coast, and was made of dried grass and lined with horse-hair or probably pony's hair ! The mother bird was very tame, and remained close by the nest for some time after being put off her eggs. On June 1st we found the third nest ; this was discovered by my friend only after turning over some hundred or so of boulders in a spot where the birds were particularly numerous ; it contained recently-hatched young and one addled egg. The Rock Pipits' eggs that we took in the Shetlands are larger than any Meadow Pipits' eggs that I

have ever seen, but very similar in coloration, though perhaps they have a browner tint.

SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*). Observed on Bressay, May 27th, also at Sand Lodge, June 6th.

HOUSE MARTIN (*Hirundo urbica*). Several pairs flying about the cliffs in the north of Unst, May 31st; several birds at Sand Lodge, June 6th.

TWITE (*Linota flavirostris*). Local name "Lintie." Generally distributed. It was a novel experience to find "Linnets'" nests in such situations as the Wagtails build in, though of course we were quite prepared for it. The nests we found were built either in crevices of rocks or amongst the heath and rough grass on the banks of streams, and were composed of such materials as one would expect to find in a Linnet's nest, being generally lined with sheep's wool of several colours, brown, white, &c. One nest we found contained newly-hatched young, and in several cases the eggs were in an advanced state of incubation. The eggs are beautiful objects when fresh, being much bluer than an ordinary Linnet's egg, but are spotted and streaked in the same varied way. The yellow beak of the male bird is very noticeable at some distance away.

STARLING (*Sturnus vulgaris*). Found nesting abundantly in the heaps of stones piled up in different places, and frequently in holes close to the ground.

RAVEN (*Corvus corax*). Breeds in many places still. On Noss, on the 27th of May, we surprised two birds on the cliffs that appeared to be birds of the year; in Unst we saw a lot of Ravens, five together at one place. On an island in the south we saw a well-preserved nest from which the young had been taken a few years ago.

HOODED CROW (*Corvus cornix*). "Hoodie." Very generally distributed, and nest frequently easy of access. We were too late to find eggs; we discovered several nests with young 10 days or so old in them. Some eggs given to us by Mr. George Bruce, and others we obtained elsewhere, are

lighter in coloration than the generality of the eggs of the Carrion Crow of the south.

SKY-LARK (*Alauda arvensis*). Very abundant everywhere, and very welcome in a land where song-birds are few and far between.

SNOWY OWL (*Surnia nyctea*). A specimen was shot in Unst a few weeks before our arrival there.

— WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaëtus albicilla*). This Eagle is said to breed still, amongst other places, at Fitful Head; but an intelligent fisherman there, who appeared to know something of the local birds, informed us that he had not seen anything of the Eagles for some years, and did not believe they nested there now.

— MERLIN (*Falco aesalon*). We saw Merlins several times, and once found the nest with two eggs; these were placed on a bare spot on the side of a heath-clad bank. The old birds, as is their wont under such circumstances, were very vociferous. The Merlin here, as elsewhere on the sea-coast, appears to feed much on the Rock-Pipits.

— CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax carbo*). The “Big Scarf” is not nearly so abundant as its smaller relative the Shag. It nests earlier than the Shag.

SHAG (*Phalacrocorax graculus*). “Scarf.” Very abundant and generally distributed as a breeding species. I shall never forget a visit I paid to a large breeding colony down the cliffs of Noss on the 28th of May. The place where I managed to effect a landing amongst them was where there had been a large landslip some years previously, and the broken cliffs abounded with caverns, and huge boulders were piled one upon the top of another. Inside these caverns, and under these boulders, the Shags had placed their untidy nests. As I approached them they generally retreated to the end of their cave, and there set up such a hideous noise as must be heard to be duly appreciated, all the while opening their mouths wide and exposing the peculiar yellow throat, or snapping their beaks. Occasionally they

would vary the proceedings by charging out, and then one had to hold firm to avoid being sent down the cliff by them! The number of nests containing eggs about equalled those containing young: the young were in all stages of growth, and the eggs in some nests were quite fresh; five was not at all an unusual number to find in a nest. Shags appear, like many other birds, to keep on adding to the fabric of their nests during incubation, for I found many nests, containing well-grown young, with green vegetation round the edges. The ground all round was honeycombed with the nesting-holes of Puffins, and on the lower ledges below the Kittiwakes were building their nests. It was an interesting scene of bird-life, but not pleasant to the olfactory nerves; and the worst of that "Shaggery" was that the birds, their nests and eggs, the caves, the rocks, the very ground, were all swarming with Shag-lice, and it took my friend and myself, and some sympathizing fellow-passengers in the ferry-boat, all our time to pick these lice off my clothes and consign them to a watery grave. To give them their due, they did not bite, but they tickled one most uncomfortably, and I shall think twice before I explore a crowded "Shaggery" again.

HERON (*Ardea cinerea*). One seen on Noss, May 26th.

WILD DUCK (*Anas boschas*). Noticed pretty generally.

COMMON EIDER (*Somateria mollissima*). "Dunter." Noticed pretty generally, especially the male birds, which are very handsome and conspicuous objects. We found several nests, the parent duck sitting very close on her large dark-green eggs. The natives consider these eggs a great delicacy.

RING-DOVE (*Columba palumbus*). One seen close to Guendale Bay, June 8th.

ROCK-DOVE (*Columba livia*). Abundant. The old "Broch" or Picts' Castle on Mousa has been fairly taken possession of by the Rock-Doves, which have turned its circular galleries into a dove-cot. Exploring these with the aid of candles we

discovered several eggs, but most of the first nests had already produced young birds which had flown. One of these we found on the outside of the building and inspected closely, besides the remains of several more which appeared to have afforded meals to the Peregrines of the neighbourhood.

TURTLE-DOVE (*Turtur communis*). One remained about the garden at Sand Lodge for several days during the first week of June.

— LAND-RAIL (*Crex pratensis*). One heard near Balta Sound, June 4th.

— COOT (*Fulica atra*). Found nesting on several of the lochs in the south of Mainland.

GOLDEN PLOVER (*Charadrius pluvialis*). Apparently breeding in most places, but not abundant, in Unst, where we found two nests containing four eggs each, the old bird in each case sitting till nearly trodden upon and then flying away with legs hanging down, and trying to decoy us away from the nest with all sorts of antics. The nests were moderately deep depressions in the moss, formed in such a way that the bird would be well sheltered from observation when sitting on her eggs.

— RINGED PLOVER (*Ægialitis hiaticula*). Very abundant and breeding in all sorts of situations, from the sea-shore to the tops of the hills.

LAPWING (*Vanellus vulgaris*). Breeding on Noss and abundantly in Unst.

OYSTER-CATCHER (*Hematopus ostralegus*). We generally found this handsome bird nesting on all the islands we visited. This species is frequently to be seen contending with the Hooded Crow, which is probably trying to rifle it of its eggs or young.

— COMMON SNIFE (*Gallinago caelestis*). Generally distributed. We twice met with the young in down, and most charming little objects they are. When once discovered, and after you turn them down again, they seem to be aware that it is

of no use to try to assimilate themselves to their surroundings while actually under your eye. In a listless sort of way they move off till they are some distance from you, and then they lose no time in making themselves invisible. I have noticed this with other species, *e. g.* the Lapwing and Ringed Plover.

DUNLIN (*Tringa alpina*). A few examples were noticed in Unst.

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus hyperboreus*). A few pairs of this bird nest in Unst, where they are strictly protected.

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna macrura*). Only just returning to its breeding-ground at the beginning of June.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Larus ridibundus*). We found about 20 pairs nesting on the marsh between Lochs Spiggie and Brow, where, as we were informed by Captain MacFarlane, this species has nested only for the last three years. We saw no nests containing young, but in the few eggs which we took incubation was much advanced. This was on the 9th of June.

COMMON GULL (*Larus canus*). Breeding pretty generally on most of the islands, usually in small colonies, the nest being built indifferently on rocks or on the ground close to the sea. The eggs vary considerably in size, even in the same nest.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus maximus*). Generally distributed, usually selecting an isolated rock on which to place its nest, but on the Holm of Noss, which is quite inaccessible, there is a large colony, numbering some scores of pairs, of great Black-backs.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus fuscus*). Very abundant, nesting on all the islands, sometimes in colonies away from the coast, but as a rule on the low rocks or shingle close to the sea-shore. This species does not place its nests in lofty situations like the Herring Gull. From the many hundreds of eggs which we saw "in nido" we selected a series of

beautiful varieties, some having the ground tint of a lovely bluish-green colour, others being straw-coloured. The second layings of this bird show a marked deterioration in size, and more variation in colouring than the eggs of the first set. As this species takes no pains to place its eggs in inaccessible situations, it probably comes in for more rifling by the natives than any other species. I think the Shetland natives are more diligent in collecting and eating the eggs of sea-fowl than even the natives of Wales. We managed to persuade some of our boatmen that they gave themselves useless trouble when they gathered eggs which rose to the surface immediately on being placed in water.

— HERRING GULL (*Larus argentatus*). Very abundant, nesting as a rule on lofty cliffs, but not nearly so invariably as is the case on the coasts of England and Wales. In Shetland you frequently find the Herring Gull's nest "on the flat" at the top of a cliff.

— KITTIWAKE (*Rissa tridactyla*). There are very large colonies of this elegant Gull at the foot of many of the loftier cliffs, notably at the Noup of Noss and in the northern parts of Unst. Most of these birds were only building their nests at the end of the first week in June.

— RICHARDSON'S SKUA (*Stercorarius crepidatus*). There is a large colony of this very interesting bird in the north of Unst, and several smaller colonies on other islands, "Scoutie Allan" being the name by which it is known to the natives. The peculiar half cat-, half peacock-like cry of this bird, its mysterious dark and light phases of plumage, and the rapidity of its evolutions when on wing, combine to render it one of the most fascinating birds I know. The birds were only just beginning to lay in the first week of June; one nest we found contained an egg of a beautiful blue undertint, the other egg in the nest being of the normal coloration.

— GREAT SKUA (*Stercorarius catarrhactes*). We saw one of these fine birds circling high up in the air, like some bird of

prey, when we were some distance from the nesting-ground in Unst. The man in charge informed us that seven pairs nested on Hermanness Hill in 1891, and nine pairs in 1892; one of these pairs had been robbed of their eggs by the natives a few weeks before our visit, but at that time they were sitting again, and from what I have since heard I believe that the nine pairs of Skuas all hatched off their eggs in 1892.

† RAZORBILL (*Alca torda*). Abundant.

+ COMMON GUILLEMOT (*Uria troile*). Abundant.

— BLACK GUILLEMOT (*Uria grylle*). “Tystie.” This is the Guillemot of the Shetlands, and is a noticeable feature in the “seascape” everywhere, with its black plumage and conspicuous white wing-patches. It is a difficult thing to discover the nesting-hole of this species, as the bird seldom betrays its secret by flying either to or from its eggs whilst anyone is looking on. We obtained eggs in the first week of June.

PUFFIN (*Fratercula arctica*). Abundant, nesting in many places. The Puffin is said to be able to hurt one’s hand severely with its beak. I can only say that a great many Puffins have had hold of my hand, and that they have never yet hurt me. I suppose I have been more lucky than others.

In conclusion I may say that a visitor to the Shetlands must be at once struck with the great tameness of the Gulls. They may be seen, especially in the early morning, standing on the roofs of the houses in large flocks, and perching on the boats in the harbour, while people are passing within a few feet of them. Another noticeable feature is that the breeding-season of one species of bird is not so far before or behind another as is the case further south; *e.g.* the Herring Gull is not nearly so much earlier in nesting than the Kittiwake as it is in the south.